Most artwork can adapt well to being framed a variety of ways. Individual taste always leads framers to one particular solution they feel is the best choice, but other options will enhance the art, too. When creating frame designs for display in your frame shop or gallery, you have the luxury of doing whatever you feel is best for the art. Your examples don’t necessarily have to fit a specific color scheme, style, or space, so you have an opportunity to create your ideal designs.

When framing for customers, however, your approach may need to be quite different. The art of compromise is important when other people are involved because their taste and personal style may be very different from your own. There is a difference between selecting your favorite frame design for a piece of art and being able to objectively see other options that may work just as well but are simply not to your taste.

When creating custom frame designs, it is important to always try to maintain the integrity of the art. Equally important, or perhaps more important, is satisfying your customers. When you design using logic rather than emotion, you can usually arrive at a good solution that satisfies both needs.

Your job as a custom frame designer becomes more challenging when you are faced with a customer whose tastes are dramatically different from your own and who wants to place the framed piece in a room that is less than ideal for it. Many people unknowingly select art that is inappropriate for the space where they intend to display it. There is a saying, “Good art does not have to match the sofa.” Although this is true, it is also a good idea to consider the surroundings if the art is destined for a specific room. Customers can purchase whatever art they find appealing, but you need to show them the benefits of being flexible about where it will hang rather than designating a particular wall for it.

In addition to purchasing art that may clash with colors in the decor, the style and size of the art that

The Art of Compromise

There are numerous ways to frame any piece of art. Keep an open mind about helping your customers find the best possible look that suits their tastes and styles.
consumers purchase may not be ideal, either. So if a customer brings in a piece that isn’t a good fit for the room where they want to use it, how do you proceed? There is no single answer. You have to weigh your ability to overcome the obstacles presented to you. There may be times when you have to tell your customers it simply will not work. At other times, you just work your design magic and create a solution without customers realizing there was a problem.

Some framers like to ask their customers what type of frame design they have in mind. That approach, however, opens the door for them to tell you something that is all wrong for their art. At that point you are either stuck using their ideas and selling custom frame designs you cannot be proud of or you have to figure out a way to tactfully tell them it is not a good choice and show something else. It’s like having your doctor ask you what you have in mind and you saying that you think you need open heart surgery, then having him reply, “Great, I’ll get it scheduled.”

As an alternative to specifically asking your customers what type of frame design they want, consider asking a series of questions that help you understand their decor, which in turn gives you a glimpse of their personal taste and style. The common questions to ask are:

- What room will the art hang in?
- What is the color scheme of that room? Find out specifically which color is on the wall and other large fields of color nearby.
- What is the style of the room? Get specific. For example, contemporary can be anything from mid-century modern, now considered antique, to a sleek retro look of metal, glass, and leather from the 60s or 70s to a softer, earthier contemporary of wood tones and linen that is often seen today. You won’t know if you don’t ask.
- Are there other pieces of framed art in the room? If so, how are they framed?
- What is the overall size of the room?
- What is the size of the wall where the art will hang? Get ceiling height, too.

If you want to know more, ask. Other questions could be about windows, light from lamps, the scale of the furnishings, etc. Listen carefully to every answer your customers give and come up with a game plan. In other words, develop the perfect frame design for the situation.

Think carefully about how to present your design concepts to your customers. First of all, make it all about them. Explain how you are showing each component because it addresses their taste, their style, their colors, and their space. Think about what is motivating them to have the piece framed. Try to work that into your presentation, too. Why wouldn’t someone want your design if they hear the answer they asked for?

And don’t forget that there will be times when you have to compromise in terms of color, style, or scale. Sometimes you may have to compromise on all three.

### Challenge 1:
The Colors of the Art Don’t Relate to the Room

As mentioned, the art does not have to match the room. However, you want it to look good in that space. If the colors of the art do not relate to the room, you won’t be doing any favors to the art or the room to impose the colors from one onto the other. For example, if the art is red and blue and the room is green and yellow, a red and blue mat and frame combination is just adding more of the foreign color to the space. If you use a green and yellow mat and frame combination, it won’t have any relationship to the art.

If the art colors are at the point of looking ridiculous or offensive, you as the professional have to choose whether you can have a conversation with the customer about possibly choosing a different piece of art or suggesting that this piece be hung somewhere else where it may work better with the surroundings. If your customer insists on this piece of art in the original room, it’s time to compromise.

### The Compromise

In situations where there is color conflict, the alternative is
to go neutral. Neutral designs are safe, but safe does not always lead to the most interesting of designs. In this case, however, it is smart to surrender a bit of drama to avoid the use of clashing colors.

Challenge 2
The Art Is the Wrong Style for the Room
The same idea that applies to color not matching a room can also be applied to style. There are some styles that work better together than others. For example, abstract art can look great in a traditional room and African art can look good in a contemporary space. On the flip side, some combinations are not a good match. For example, Colonial American art would not fit well in a tranquil Asian Zen-inspired space. When these differences occur, you decide if it is necessary to confront it or to simply figure out what you can do to make it work.

The Compromise
Custom framers are accustomed to choosing profiles to match the style of the art being framed. When that style will not look flattering in the room, consider your options. A frame can actually become a bridge that serves as a transi-

sition between the contradictory elements. One example is in placing abstract art in a traditional space. There may be a traditional ornate frame that mimics shapes or patterns in the art that would help the opposing style of the art look more appropriate in the room. A more traditional landscape can be framed in a soft contemporary moulding that may help it relate better to a modern space.

Challenge 3
The Art Is Too Large for Its Space
When you ask your customers where they intend to hang their art, you may find that it will be crowded into a space. You can tactfully suggest finding an alternate location for the art, allowing you to create an ideal frame design and give it the proper space to looks its best. If your customer is not open to that idea, compromise is in order.

The Compromise
If the art is an open edition print (of no significant value) determine if it can be cropped without losing its integrity. Let’s say it is a still life centered on a blank background. You may not lose any integrity by reducing the size or simply covering part of it with a mat. If the art is original (or otherwise valuable) look for frame design options using narrow mouldings with more depth. They will allow you to gain a sense of scale or visual weight without outgrowing the available space.

Challenge 4
The Art Is Too Small for Its Space
Your customer informs you that she wants to display a small piece of art on a large, prominent wall space. Being
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an advocate for your customer, you may want to suggest
that the small size of the art doesn’t relate well to the avail-
able space. You can recommend finding a larger piece of
art for that particular wall or ask if there is another wall
space where the small piece of art will fit better. If she is
determined to hang the art there, then compromise.

The Compromise
Use wider mat borders, liners, or frames to increase the
overall size of the piece to better fit the space. Even if it
still is not the ideal size, you will give the art more pres-
ence on the wall. To grow the overall size significantly,
you may need to do several things. If you just add a few
inches to the mat, the art may simply look like it is
drowning in a mat. If you only add a wide moulding, it
may appear to confine or crowd the art. The key to suc-
cessfully growing a frame design usually relies on the rela-
tionship of all the different components. You may also
need to add components. For example, instead of show-
ing a double or triple mat, show four layers. You can cre-
ate a faux French mat, giving the impression of a panel
with lines on either side of it. This will break up the sur-
face space of the mat border so you can use a wider bor-
dier more effectively. Your success in achieving wider mat
borders will also enable you to use a wider frame without
crowding the art. Another alternative is to add one or
more other pieces of art to create a grouping. This will
still allow your customer to do exactly what she wants to
do, but you are helping her make it happen in a more
polished way.

Challenge 5
Your Design Concept Is Too Expensive
It’s always a smart idea to show your customers your best
design concepts. Let them decide whether or not they can
afford the designs you suggest. When they say no, look
for an alternative to bring the price down to their budgets
without losing the integrity or essence of the design. Even
if the conversation starts with the customer saying, “I
don’t want to spend much,” your idea of not much may
be very different from what that customer is thinking.
Showing a design you think fits the bill may be way too
minimal in appearance compared to what the customer
wants. If you want to acknowledge that you heard the
customer’s concerns, you can say, “Let’s agree on a frame
design you think looks great and if it happens to be over
your budget, we will look for an alternative.”

The Compromise
First, check to see if you are close to a point where a slight
decrease in the mat borders would take you into a smaller
glass size as well as reduce the united inches of the other
components. If you can reduce a mat border by \( \frac{1}{2} \)” or \( \frac{3}{4} \)”
and still use the desired frame, it may be the best way to
maintain the desired look.

If you have sold Museum Glass, you can always back
down to other conservation glazing products without
affecting the proportions you determined would look best.
If you chose a fabric mat, you can also switch to a rag mat
to bring down the price. If you have to alter the moulding,
look for one with similar characteristics. Your choice will
usually be to reduce width because a slightly narrower pro-
file may cost less or you can reduce quality. One of those
compromises may be more appropriate than the other,
depending on the art. For example, if you are framing a
very special original piece, sacrificing width may be smarter
than sacrificing quality.

Review
Always try to remove your taste from the design process
with customers unless they ask for that. When you design
objectively, using logic, you will find that some issues are
not important enough to worry about. You can simply
show frame designs that help overcome design issues and
make a design work.

When you definitely see a problem that needs to be
addressed, try to offer a workable solution to help your cus-
tomers get what they want. Also realize that people come
to you for your help and your expertise. If you stay quiet
because you don’t want to hurt someone’s feelings, that per-
son may end up not liking the result and may be unsatis-
fied with you. Speak up when there is something to say
that helps a customer. If customers choose to not follow
your advice, that is their choice.

The most important thing to remember is that there
are numerous ways to frame any piece of art. Keep an open
mind about helping your customers find the best possible
look that suits their tastes and styles. Satisfied customers are
more likely to become loyal customers, and that is going to
help you build a successful business.

Greg Perkins, CPF is in his 39th year in the framing indus-
try. Starting out as a retailer, he has been with Larson-Juhl
for the past 20 years. He holds the position of Customer
Programs Manager. In addition, he is an author, contributing
editor, industry educator and an artist.